

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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a **NEW** short story by

**JACK RITCHIE**

*If you were a felon with a prison record—just supposing, of course, folks—and you were about to break into a liquor store late at night and observed a murder, what would you do . . . ?*

## THE SECOND LETTER

by **JACK RITCHIE**

There is no more deserted place than a small-town shopping center after midnight—or a more conspicuous place to park a car—so I left mine in the darkness of a side street a block away. I took my bag of tools out of the trunk and walked the rest of the way.

I was at the rear door of the liquor store, working on the lock, when I heard a car and caught the flash of headlights turning into the lane behind the store. My first thought was that it might be the town squad car making a routine check of the area, so I ducked into the shadows and hugged the wall.

As the car moved slowly past, I breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't a squad car. It went on for another twenty feet and then came to an abrupt stop.

The passenger-side door swung open and I heard cursing and what sounded like a scuffle. A man tumbled out of the car and he seemed about to dive back when there was the sound of a shot and he dropped to the pavement. A hand reached out from inside the car and pulled the door shut. I found myself staring at the rear license-plate as the automobile roared away.

When it disappeared, I rushed to the spot where the man had fallen and used my flashlight. He appeared to be in his thirties and he was quite dead, with a bullet hole in his chest.

I had just witnessed a murder, but I really couldn't go to the police.

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My parole officer hadn't seen me in over two years and I could get into a lot of trouble if he knew where I was. It would be wise to get out of this town as quickly as possible and forget the whole thing.

I returned to my car and drove back to the big city, arriving there just as the sun rose.

In my apartment, I made myself a stiff drink, and then went to bed. But I couldn't sleep. That license-plate number seemed to have fastened itself in my mind. I wanted to forget it, and I tried to, but it was no use.

Finally I got out of bed and carefully slipped a sheet of paper into my portable typewriter so that I wouldn't leave any fingerprints, and began hunt-and-peck typing.

Dear Sir:

Last night I witnessed the murder of a man in the alley behind the liquor store in the shopping center of your town.

For personal reasons, I cannot go directly to the police. However, I was able to get the license-number of the automobile from which the fatal shot was fired. It is C45-871.

Concerned Citizen

I addressed an envelope to the Jefferson Falls Chief of Police and went out to mail the letter.

Now it was up to the Chief of Police. He'd find the owner of the car, question him, get corroborative evidence, and probably even a confession.

I felt rather good about what I had done. Really quite exhilarated at the performance of my civic duty.

I let a month pass before I decided to go back to Jefferson Falls and have another try at the liquor store.

I arrived in the early evening quite hungry, so I dropped into a café on Main Street. I took a stool at the counter and ordered the day's special, Swiss steak and mashed potatoes.

The girl behind the counter wasn't very busy and so she lingered near, ready to talk. "Nice quiet little town you've got here," I said. She seemed rather proud to be able to deny that. "Oh, I don't know. We've got our excitement, too."

I had the feeling that she was going to talk about the murder, and she did.

"A month ago, Bob Jenson got himself shot and killed. He worked at the garage down the street."

"Well, well," I said. "So things *do* happen here. Who shot him?"

"Nobody knows."

I frowned. "Weren't there any suspects?"

"I guess half the people in town were questioned. But the killer's still walking around town. If he's from town, I mean. He could be from out of town or even out of state."

I pondered. Had that license-plate number been that of a stolen car and therefore led to a blind alley? Or had my letter simply gotten lost in the maze of the postal system? If the latter was the case, I would have to rectify that.

After I finished eating, I went to the nearest drugstore and bought some stationery and a stamp. I would have preferred to use a typewriter, but none being available, I used my ballpoint pen.

Dear Sir:

About a month ago I witnessed a murder in your town and wrote you a note to that effect, including the license number of the car from which the fatal shot was fired.

There is a possibility that you may not have received my letter. Therefore, I am writing you again. The license-plate number is C45-871.

Concerned Citizen II

I addressed the envelope to the Jefferson Falls Chief of Police and dropped the letter into the nearest mailbox.

I had intended to take care of the liquor-store job that night and immediately depart. However, I decided to postpone the operation for a day or two until I found out what the police would do when they received my second note. I registered at a small hotel on Main Street.

The next morning at eleven, there was a knock at my door. I opened it and found a portly, gray-haired man in a policeman's uniform standing in the hall.

He studied me. "I'm the Chief of Police here. I got your letter this morning."

I played innocent. "Letter? What letter? I don't know anything about a letter."

He smiled, but without humor. "Your envelope was postmarked Jefferson Falls, so I took the chance that you might still be in town and maybe at a hotel. I came here because this is the only one we've got. I'm not a handwriting expert, but I'd say that the handwriting in the letter matches yours in the hotel register."

He stepped into the room. "Are you positive about that license-number?"

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I sighed. "Positive."

"And you saw Jenson get shot?"

"Yes."

"Can you give me a description of the killer?"

"I'm afraid not. All I saw of him was his arm and hand."

"You're sure this isn't a crank letter trying to get someone into trouble?"

"No. I saw the killing and that's the number."

"Where did this killing take place?"

"In the shopping center at the edge of town."

"You could have read that in our newspaper."

"I've never even seen a copy of your newspaper."

"The coroner said that Jenson was shot about midnight. What were you doing there at midnight?"

I cleared my throat. "I couldn't sleep, so I took a walk around town. I thought that alley was a shortcut back to the hotel."

He seemed to buy that. "All right. I want you to come with me and show me the exact spot where Jenson died."

We went downstairs to his squad car and he drove to the shopping center. I showed him the spot where Jenson had dropped.

Back in the squad car, the chief tried again. "You're absolutely positive about that license-plate number?"

"Absolutely. I can't seem to forget it."

He began driving. I'd expected him to take me back to the hotel, but instead he made a right turn and headed into the country.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To let my sergeant know about this. He lives just outside of town. It's his day off."

I nodded. "Then I suppose you'll get in touch with the Motor Vehicle Department and trace down that license-number?"

"No. That won't be necessary. I know who it belongs to."

"Who?"

He took his eyes off the road for a moment. "Me."

I stared at him, beginning to feel uneasy. "But the shot wasn't fired from a squad car."

"I don't use the squad car for private purposes. I've got a car of my own."

And then it all came to me. When he had received my first note a month ago, he had recognized his own license-plate number. Perhaps he had even come looking for me, but I was no longer in town.

But I had made the mistake of coming back and writing another letter.

And now he was sitting beside me. The killer. And he had a gun—a big gun, in that holster.

I began to perspire. "Now that I think of it again, I believe I was mistaken about that number. I have a very *bad* memory and actually I can't see too well, either. I just *guessed* at the last three numbers."

He looked at me again and then smiled, almost sadly. "I believe the note."

I closed my eyes. What could I do now? Overpower him? He was much bigger than I am. Should I throw myself out of the car? I'd probably get killed since we seemed to be doing close to fifty-five.

I was still thinking desperately when he slowed the car and turned into a long dirt driveway. "I never got your first note," he said. "When Jenson was shot, I was in the Hawaiian Islands on my vacation."

He stopped at the farmhouse at the end of the drive. "Whenever I'm gone, Charlie Watkins is Acting Chief of Police, and that includes opening any mail addressed to me."

He opened the door to his side of the car. "I went to Hawaii, but my car didn't. I let Charlie use it while I was gone because he was having trouble with his." He sighed. "Funny how you never suspect one of your own. But now it all comes together. Jenson and Charlie were drinking buddies and Charlie always carried his gun when he was off duty. I guess he and Jenson had some kind of a disagreement. I'll have the state lab run a test on Charlie's gun."

The state lab test proved that Sergeant Charlie Watkins' revolver was the weapon used to kill Bob Jenson. Watkins was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to the state prison.

I was sent back there too for violating my parole. How was that for gratitude? After all I'd done to see that justice was done. No wonder people don't want to become involved.

